

Mary Ann Ball Bickerdyke

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Not everyone who played an important role in the Civil War is famous. A relatively unknown nurse helped care for many injured and ill soldiers, and her involvement was completely voluntarily. Mary Bickerdyke was a determined and powerful woman who served the North during the Civil War.

Bickerdyke came from a family of activists. Some of her ancestors arrived on the Mayflower. Others participated in the Revolutionary War, and her grandfather fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Such a family legacy encouraged Mary to participate in social movements.

Bickerdyke, however, had a rough childhood and a difficult life as an adult. She grew up without a mother and lived on a farm. She spent most of her time outdoors and performed the physical labor that shaped her into a strong woman. She attended Oberlin College, but an epidemic forced her to drop out. Bickerdyke then took a nursing course instructed by Dr. Reuben Mussey. In 1847, she married Robert Bickerdyke, a widower who died in 1859. This left her alone to support herself and her children when she lived in Galesburg, Illinois.

Not long afterward, Mary responded to the call for duty. President Lincoln asked for nurses and doctors to care for Northern soldiers during the Civil War. Bickerdyke heard this plea while attending a church service and decided to answer the call for help. With little money and few supplies, she left her house and children to contribute to the war effort. She wasted no time. She helped evacuate wounded soldiers on hospital boats

after the Battle of Fort Donelson. She organized a kitchen where sick soldiers received nutritious meals. She promoted hygiene by supplying portable baths consisting of a bowl made from an empty hog's head lined with a linen towel. Finally, Bickerdyke saw to it that each soldier received frequent physical examinations and was checked for diseases or potential physical problems. With the help of the United States Sanitary Commission, Bickerdyke oversaw more than three hundred field hospitals.

Although Mary Bickerdyke was brusque, she was kind to wounded soldiers. She bonded with them, and she acted as their mother, thus receiving her famous nickname, Mother Bickerdyke. Most people who worked with Bickerdyke noted her sharp mind and her common sense. Her priority was always for those who needed assistance.

Surprisingly, Bickerdyke was not paid a cent for all her hard work. Her five years of service were voluntary. After the war, she helped secure pensions for many soldiers, and in 1886 she eventually earned one herself from Congress for twenty-five dollars a month. Bickerdyke continued volunteering for different organizations such as the Chicago House of the Friendless. She eventually moved to New York City to work for the Protestant Board of City Missions. After four years, she relocated to Kansas where her sons lived, and she helped victims of the locust plague. Bickerdyke lived in Kansas until her death in 1901. Nurses and doctors in Illinois, however, did not forget her contributions. In 1903, the Grand Army of the Republic and the Women's Relief Corps raised five thousand dollars to build a monument in Illinois honoring her work. Even today, Bickerdyke serves as an example of patriotism and a role model for nurses. [From E. V. Erlandson, "The Story of Mother Bickerdyke." *American Journal of Nursing* 20.8 (May 1920): 628-631. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org> (Sept. 7, 2008); Henry McCormick,

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